

Malcolm's Monday Musings : 6 September 2021.

Greetings.

This is my 'Monday Musings' email.

In all of my weekly emails over the past seventeen months, I have avoided any mention of the COVID-19 virus and have sought to focus attention on 'higher things'.

I am making an exception *this week* by inviting you to consider two quotations from the writings of Martin Luther.

1. I begin by commenting briefly on the background to the **first quotation**.

In August/September 1527, there was an outbreak of the dreaded bubonic plague in Luther's hometown of Wittenburg in Germany. Shortly before, Johann Hess (the recognised leader of the Reformation in Silesia) had written to Luther, asking whether it was proper for a Christian to leave a city in the midst of an outbreak of the plague.

This is part of Luther's lengthy – and wise – response, written soon after the plague broke out in Wittenburg:

'I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it.

I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others ...

If the people in a city were to show themselves bold in their faith when a neighbour's need so demands, and cautious when no emergency exists, and if everyone would help ward off contagion as best he can, then the death toll would indeed be moderate'.

(Source: *'Luther's Works, Vol. 43: Devotional Writings II'*, Fortress Press 1968, page 132.)

2. Many of us (particularly in the West) are very familiar with wearing face masks.

My **second quotation** comes from Luther's 'Exposition of Psalm 147'.

In his Exposition, Martin Luther speaks of man's works and labours as *'the masks of God'*, behind which He hides when at work in the world.

Over to you, Mr Luther:

'God could easily give you grain and fruit without your ploughing and planting. But He does not want to do so ...

What else is all our work to God—whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, or in government—but just such a child's performance, by which He wants to give His gifts in the fields, at home, and everywhere else? *These are the masks of God*, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things.

... Make the bars and gates, and let Him fasten them. Labour, and let Him give the fruits. Govern, and let Him give His blessing. Fight, and let Him give the victory. Preach, and let Him win hearts. Take a husband or a wife, and let Him produce the children. Eat and drink, and let Him nourish and strengthen you. And so on.

In all our doings He is to work through us, and He alone shall have the glory from it'.

With these words of Martin Luther about 'the masks of God' in mind, the next time you put on a face mask you may wish to remind yourself that God deigns to use you and me to carry out His work – and to be careful to give Him all the glory!

I leave you now to enjoy the (non-COVID-19 related) musings below.

Yours in our Lord Jesus,

Malcolm

(i) Scripture.

When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon.

And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place.

But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him ...

The hand of the Lord was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and He terrified and afflicted them with tumours, both Ashdod and its territory.

And when the men of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is hard against us and against Dagon our god".

So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?" They answered, "Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought around to Gath". So they brought the ark of the God of Israel there.

But after they had brought it around, the hand of the Lord was against the city, causing a very great panic, and He afflicted the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumours broke out on them.

So they sent the ark of God to Ekron. But as soon as the ark of God came to Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, "They have brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people".

They sent therefore and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, "Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people". For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there.

1 Samuel 5. 1-11 (*English Standard Version*)

(ii) Food for thought.

The time when Israel's 'lucky charm' became the Philistines' 'hot potato' (1 Sam. 4 and 5).

(i) 'The elders of Israel said, "Let us bring the ark ... that it may save us"' (1 Sam. 4. 3).

(ii) 'They gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, "Send away the ark ... that it may not kill us" (1 Sam. 5. 11).

'Chapter 4 had demonstrated that the ark, as a God-appointed symbol, was not to be treated superstitiously in the manner that the Israelites had done. But chapter 5 demonstrates that neither was the ark to be treated disrespectfully in the manner that the Philistines did.

The events of chapter 4 had proven that the ark had no power in itself. But, as the Philistines discovered to their cost in chapter 5, things were very different when God chose to manifest His presence and power through the ark. And now the God who refused to be manipulated by the Israelites in chapter 4, refused to be subjugated by the Philistines in chapter 5.

The Lord's people may have been defeated in battle, but He had not been. And if towards the close of chapter 4, Eli is said to have fallen 'backward' at the news that the ark of God was taken, in the opening section of chapter 5 the image of the Philistine god is twice said to fall forward ('upon his face'; a posture associated with worship) before that same ark! ...

Dagon lost, not only his head, but his hands too. Yet, though Dagon now had no hands, the Lord did —as the Philistines soon discovered! For His hand was 'heavy upon them', and, as they acknowledged, was 'sore' ('severe') upon both their bodies and on their god (1 Sam. 5. 6-7).

(*'Living in the Promised Land'*, Precious Seed Publications, page 107.)

'I will sing' in the Psalms.

(i) To His Name: 'I will sing praise to Thy name, O Thou Most High' (Psa. 7. 17).

(ii) Of His Bounty: 'I will sing unto the Lord, because He hath dealt bountifully with me' (Psa. 13. 6).

(iii) Of His Power: 'I will sing of Thy power' (Psa. 59. 16).

(iv) Of His Mercies: 'I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever' (Psa. 89. 1).

(v) For His Faithfulness: 'I will also praise you ... for your faithfulness, O my God; I will sing praises to you' (Psa. 71. 22 ESV).

Jacob leaving Peniel: 'Just as he crossed over Peniel the sun rose on him' (Gen. 32. 31).

'It was like the sunrise was just for Jacob that morning! A new day had dawned for him, and everything had changed. He had a new honesty. In Genesis 27, we read of his being asked the question, "Who are you, my son?" Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn" (Gen. 27. 18-19). But this night the Lord said to him, "What is your name?" He said, "Jacob" (Gen. 32. 27) ...

and the man who had lined up his wives and children and servants and livestock as a series of buffers between himself and his supposed adversary, now “crossed over before them” (Gen. 33. 3)!

‘Why? He had seen the face of God and his life had been preserved (Gen. 32. 30), so it put seeing Esau’s face in perspective. “The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe” (Prov. 29. 25). It was one thing to see the company of angels and call the locale “Mahanaim” (Gen. 32. 2); now he calls this place ‘Peniel’, “for,” he said, “I have seen God face to face” (Gen. 32. 30)’.

(J. B. Nicholson Jr, ‘*Sunrise for a new man*’, Uplook Ministries: Taste and See, 9 August 2021.)

The Lord Jesus and a bunch of seven sweet “P’s”.

He is our:

- (i) Passover: ‘Christ our passover is sacrificed for us’ (1 Cor. 5. 7).
- (ii) Propitiation: ‘He is the propitiation for our sins’ (1 John 2. 2).
- (iii) Pardon: ‘In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins’ (Eph. 1. 7).
- (iv) Peace: ‘We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Rom. 5. 1).
- (v) Prize: ‘That I may win Christ, and be found in Him’ (Phil. 3. 8).
- (vi) Priest: ‘We have a great high priest’ (Heb. 8. 1).
- (vii) Prospect: ‘Christ Jesus our hope’ (1 Tim. 1. 1 RV).

‘If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you will, and it shall be done unto you’ (John 15. 7).

‘The petitions of the true disciples are echoes (so to speak) of Christ’s words. As He has spoken so they speak. Their prayer is only some fragment of His teaching transformed into a supplication, and so it will necessarily be heard. It is important to notice how the promise of the absolute fulfilment of prayer is connected with the personal fellowship of the believer with Christ’.

(B. F. Westcott, ‘*The Gospel according to St. John: The Greek Text*’, Volume II, page 201.

Five wrong suppositions about the Lord Jesus.

- (i) People, in general, supposed He was the son of Joseph: ‘Jesus Himself began to be about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph’ (Luke 3. 23).
- (ii) When Joseph and Mary journeyed home from the Passover festival at Jerusalem they supposed He (the twelve-year-old Jesus) was in the returning caravan of pilgrims: ‘But they, supposing Him to have been in the company, went a day’s journey’ (Luke 2. 44).
- (iii) When crossing the Sea of Galilee, His disciples supposed He was a ghost: ‘When they saw Him walking upon the sea, they supposed it had been an apparition (Greek: ‘φάντασμα’, a phantasm)’ (Mark 6. 49).
- (iv) Early on resurrection morn, Mary Magdalene supposed He was the gardener: ‘Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away” (John 20. 15).
- (v) Late on resurrection evening, the gathered disciples supposed He was a spirit: ‘The eleven and those who were with them ... were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit’ (Luke 24. 33, 37).

The Lord Jesus and the cross.

‘Was there a price to be paid? He paid it. Was there a victory to be won? He won it. Was there a penalty to be borne? He bore it. Was there a judgment to be faced? He faced it. View man’s plight how you will, the witness of the New Testament is that Christ has come where man ought to be and has met in full all the demands that might be made on man’.

(Leon Morris, ‘*The Cross in the New Testament*’, pages 405-406.)

‘Tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?’ (Rom. 8. 35).

The apostle Paul lists seven forms of trial to which he and the Christians at Rome were exposed, seven forms of trial which represented potential obstacles to their faith.

Doubtless, there were those who feared that some or all of these trials would come between them and the love of their Lord. But Paul was confident that such trials would prove no more successful in defeating God’s people in his day than Israel’s seven enemies had been in the days of Joshua (Deut. 7. 1; Josh. 3. 10; 24. 11).

We should note that the apostle was not speaking theoretically, for in his second letter to the Corinthians (written shortly before his letter to Rome), he had specifically mentioned having already experienced personally the first six of the seven trials:

- (i) ‘tribulation’ (2 Cor. 7. 4); (ii) ‘distress’ (2 Cor. 12. 10); (iii) ‘persecution’ (2 Cor. 12. 10); (iv) ‘famine’ (‘hunger’, the same Greek word, 2 Cor. 11. 27); (v) ‘nakedness’ (2 Cor. 11. 27); and (vi) ‘peril’ (eight times in 2 Cor. 11. 26).

The apostle had not yet, of course, encountered the seventh item: the 'sword', the common symbol of capital punishment. But he *would* encounter this in time. There is an early tradition that, some six or seven years later, Paul was beheaded in Rome:

'It is ... recorded that Paul was beheaded in Rome itself and that Peter likewise was crucified under Nero. This account of Peter and Paul is substantiated by the fact that their names are preserved in the cemeteries of that place even to the present day'.

(Eusebius of Caesarea, '*Church History*', Book 2, Chapter 25, Paragraph 5.)

At the moment of his beheading, Paul proved that the 'sword' was as powerless to sever him from the love of Christ as had been the previous six experiences.

Eliphaz in the book of Job had backed up his exhortation to Job to repent with the promise that God would then bless him. Eliphaz had smugly declared, 'He will deliver you from six troubles; in seven no evil shall touch you' (Job 5. 19). But Paul proved, in a way that Job's so-called friend would never have understood, that his (Eliphaz's) words were most wonderfully true for the Christian ... that, even 'in seven' troubles, 'no evil shall touch you' (cf. 1 Pet. 3. 13).

'Seek the things that are above, where Christ is' (Col. 3. 1).

Both the hummingbird and the vulture fly over deserts. All vultures see is rotting meat, because that is what they look for. They thrive on that diet. But hummingbirds ignore the smelly flesh of dead animals. Instead, they look for the colourful blossoms of desert plants. The vultures live on what was. They live on the past. They fill themselves with what is dead and gone. But hummingbirds live on what is. They seek new life. They fill themselves with freshness and life. Each bird finds what it is looking for. We all do'.

(Steve Goodier, '*Reader's Digest*', May 1990.)

Malcolm's '4x4s':

1. Four 'foursquare' things.

(i) The altar of burnt offering: 'thou shalt make an altar of shittim wood, five cubits long, and five cubits broad; the altar shall be foursquare' (Exod. 27. 1; cf. Exod. 38. 1).

(ii) The altar of incense: 'thou shalt make an altar to burn incense upon: of shittim wood shalt thou make it. A cubit shall be the length thereof, and a cubit the breadth thereof; foursquare shall it be' (Exod. 30. 2 cf. Exod. 37. 25).

(iii) The High Priest's breastplate: 'thou shalt make the breastplate of judgment ... Foursquare it shall be being doubled; a span shall be the length thereof, and a span shall be the breadth thereof' (Exod. 28. 16; cf. Exod. 39. 9).

(iv) The New Jerusalem: 'that great city, the holy Jerusalem ... lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth' (Rev. 21. 16).

2. Four gifts given by the Father to the Lord Jesus (John 17).

(i) Work: 'I have finished the work which you gave me to do' (John 17. 4).

(ii) Men: 'I have manifested your name to the men whom you gave me out of the world' (John 17. 6; cf. 17. 12; 18. 9).

(iii) Words: 'I have given to them the words which you gave me' (John 17. 8).

(iv) Glory: 'The glory which you gave me I have given them' (John 17. 22).

3. Four groups who 'received the word'.

(i) The Samaritans: 'The apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had *received the word* of God' (Acts 8. 14).

(ii) The Gentiles: 'The apostles and brethren that were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles had also *received the word* of God' (Acts 11. 1).

(iii) The Bereans: 'They were more noble than (the unbelieving Jews) in Thessalonica, in that they *received the word* with all readiness of mind' (Acts 17. 11).

(iv) The Thessalonians: 'You became followers of us, and of the Lord, having *received the word* in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit' (1 Thess. 1. 6) and 'When you *received the word* of God which you heard from us, you received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God' (1 Thess. 2. 13).

4. Four "if so be's".

(i) The indwelling of the Holy Spirit: 'You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, *if so be* that the Spirit of God dwell in you' (Rom. 8. 9).

(ii) The certainty of the resurrection: 'We have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He raised not up, *if so be* that the dead rise not' (1 Cor. 15. 15).

(iii) The taste of the Lord's goodness: 'As new-born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word ... *if so be* you have tasted that the Lord is good' (1 Pet. 2. 2-3).

(iv) The glorious compensation for suffering with Christ: 'If children, then heirs, heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; *if so be* that we suffer with Him, that we also may be glorified together' (Rom. 8. 17).

And finally

'Finally'

(i) *Be strong*: 'Finally, my brethren, *be strong* in the Lord, and in the power of His might' (Eph. 6. 10).

(ii) *Rejoice*: 'Finally, my brethren, *rejoice* in the Lord' (Phil. 3. 1).

(iii) *Think*: 'Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, *think* on these things' (Phil. 4. 8).

(iv) *Walk*: 'Finally then, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as ye received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, even as ye do *walk*, that ye abound more and more' (1 Thess. 4. 1 RV).

(v) *Pray*: 'Finally, brethren, *pray* for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you' (2 Thess. 3. 1).

The Greek word translated 'finally' ('λοιπόν') signifies 'for the rest', 'besides', 'moreover'.

The apostle Paul uses it frequently in the concluding portion of his epistles, introducing practical exhortations, not necessarily implying that the letter is drawing to a close, but marking a transition in the subject-matter'.

(W. E. Vine, 'Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words', article 'Final, Finally: B. Adverb'.)

(iii) Go on, smile.

Two 'confusion' smiles for you today.

1. Gareth went to the doctor's surgery to collect his wife's test results.

Apologetically, the receptionist told him, 'I'm sorry, Mr Williams, but there's been a little mix-up. When we sent your wife's samples to the laboratory, they jumbled up her samples with those of another Mrs Williams and we don't know which set of results is your wife's'.

'The bottom line', she added, 'is that the situation is either bad or not so bad'.

'What do you mean?' Gareth asked.

'Well, it's like this', the receptionist explained. 'One Mrs Williams has tested positive for incurable loss of memory and the other Mrs Williams has tested positive for a temporary gum disease – gingivitis. Sadly, we are unable to tell which result is your wife's'.

'We will need to do the tests again', the receptionist added, 'but it will be some time before we get the results because the equipment at the laboratory has broken down'.

'That's terrible', Gareth responded. 'Is there nothing I can do in the meantime?'

'Actually, there is', the receptionist answered. 'The doctor suggests that you drop your wife off in the middle of town. *If she finds her way home, don't borrow her toothbrush*'.

2. Maureen called out to her husband, 'Henry, I'm short of some ingredients for the cake I'm baking. Would you please get some things for me from the supermarket?'

'Of course, dear', replied Henry, 'Exactly what do you need?'

'Get me one carton of milk and, if they have eggs, get six', Maureen requested.

Twenty minutes later, Henry returned ... with no eggs and with six cartons of milk.

Maureen was both angry and confused. 'Whatever possessed you to buy *six* cartons of milk?' she wanted to know.

'But, dear', Henry replied, 'that is what you asked for; *they did have eggs*'.

(You might need to think about that one!)